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SUBJECT: SULTAN QABOOS GRANTS RARE PRESS INTERVIEW

REF: MUSCAT 0047

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A rare interview given by Sultan Qaboos to a Kuwaiti newspaper painted a predictably rosy picture of the Sultanate that pushed, if not exceeded, the bounds of credibility. According to the Sultan, who was treated to fawning praise by the interviewer (also the paper's chief editor and, reputedly, a personal friend of the Sultan), the Omani people are completely united and live in perfect harmony under his leadership. More surprisingly, the Sultan directly addressed his health, a previously out-of-bounds subject, and dismissed Oman's rising inflation rate despite palpable public grumbling over higher prices. While it is unclear what prompted the Sultan to give the interview, his first in two years, one thing is certain - Oman's ruler is not yet prepared to honestly tackle tough questions in public. End Summary.

THINGS WILL ONLY GET BETTER

¶2. (SBU) On April 27, Omanis were surprised to discover that Sultan Qaboos had granted a very rare interview with Kuwait's "al-Seyassah" newspaper. The daily's editor-in-chief, Ahmed al-Jarallah, prefaced the interview with a fawning description of Oman's ruler (e.g. "When you look at His Majesty's face, you feel infinite optimism, you feel absolute serenity ...") before asking a series of generally softball questions. In his responses, the Sultan delivered upbeat remarks that focused on the progress achieved during the "Omani renaissance" (i.e., since the Sultan's assumption of power in 1970), but were characteristically short on substance.

¶3. (SBU) Throughout the interview, the Sultan expressed satisfaction with the level and pace of development in Oman, which he attributed to his government's emphasis on "building human resources through education and training" and the "great sense of responsibility" of the Omani people. He also predicted further progress that would help restore Oman's past glories: "The sun has risen on our country and we will regain our previous fame and strength and become a country worthy of respect and appreciation."

¶4. (SBU) In possible reaction to rapid change elsewhere in the region, the Sultan remarked that, "Our commitment to our real values and heritage has helped us keep abreast of the requirements of the modern age." This guarded approach towards modernization was also reflected in his comment that while "openness" to the outside world was part of the "strengthening" of Oman, "over-openness may make us lose the interests we desire for the Omani people."

WE ALL AGREE ON EVERYTHING

15. (SBU) When al-Jarallah asked why he did not "feel the presence of different ethnic groups and different opinions" in Oman, the Sultan emphasized that "we are one body, one nation." He claimed that "the Omani people are unified, and loyal to their country and its leaders, as instructed by the teachings of our religion." The Sultan further stated that Omanis "do not have the seeds for any split or division. We all enjoy the shade of national unity without any split or dispute."

16. (SBU) Noting that "some people" viewed "Omani constitutional institutions" as "better than imported democracies," al-Jarallah asked the Sultan what he viewed as "the best political systems." The Sultan replied the best systems of government are "derived from the nation's privacy, heritage, culture and its social and political legacy." He also observed that "prevailing democracies in many countries ... are dominated by arguments."

RESPECT = INTERNATIONAL HARMONY

17. (SBU) With regards to foreign policy, the Sultan repeated his familiar prescription of mutual respect and understanding (reftel). He stated, "We do not have any conflicts and we do not put fuel on the fire when our opinion does not agree with someone." Expanding on this view, the Sultan further remarked, "We don't have animosity with any country in the

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region. We know that some of them have interests and want us to respect them. We believe that we also have interests which others should respect. If so, all differences will vanish."

TWO MILD SURPRISES

18. (SBU) Only two items in the interview have raised eyebrows among some Omanis and local expatriates. First, al-Jarallah began his questions by inquiring about the Sultan's health -- a subject never before broached in the press. The Sultan responded that he enjoyed "full health and welfare," although he added that "when we grow old, our bodies become tired and whenever your body weight suffers and increase or decrease, many may believe that the man is sick."

Sultan Qaboos also remarked that he was "absorbed in the affairs of my country, which are my real health," later stating that "the land and people of Oman are in my heart and mind."

19. (C) With the rising cost of living in Oman as one of the main subjects of public conversation (and complaints), al-Jarallah asked the Sultan, "What about inflation in your country?" Despite the fact that the latest official annual inflation rate for Oman exceeds 11 percent, and in the face of rampant public grumbling about rising prices, the Sultan replied, "Inflation is not that worrying and is not so major." He further commented that, "Our inflation is not that critical and ... it can be described as a healthy condition for speeding up growth."

COMMENT

10. (C) Ahmed al-Jarallah is not only al-Seyassah's chief editor, but also reputedly a personal friend of Sultan Qaboos. It thus comes as little surprise that the Sultan's last press interview, in February 2006, appeared in the same Kuwaiti newspaper. He has not offered an interview to an

Omani newspaper in more than 15 years, purportedly so that he does not have to choose one press outlet over another. The real question is: why grant an interview, even one loaded with praise and pre-scripted, soft-focus questions, now? Some local diplomats speculate that the Sultan may have wanted to "remind" Omanis that he was healthy, thereby quashing any rumors that he might be ill, and was actively following events and supervising government business before he departed Oman for the summer.

¶11. (C) As evidenced by his comments, the Sultan is not ready to tackle tough questions from the media or to even publicly (versus privately) acknowledge the existence of problems in Oman. Even in the context of a traditional culture with differing thresholds for public and private discourse, one wonders whether he really expects readers to believe, for example, that there are no divisions or significant differences of opinion among Omanis. Moreover, his dismissal of rising inflation is clearly out of touch with public sentiment. When excerpts from Sultan Qaboos' interview first appeared on one Omani internet chatroom, but without any attribution to the Sultan, some users posted comments sharply criticizing the cavalier attitude towards rising prices. As soon as the website moderators realized the source of the disputed quotes, however, the critical discussion thread was quickly deleted, never to be repeated. End Comment.
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